United Nations E/C.12/2014/SR.16

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
12 May 2014

Original: English

Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

Fifty-second session

Summary record (partial)* of the 16th meeting

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva, on Wednesday, 7 May 2014, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Mr. Ribeiro Leão (Vice-Chairperson)
later: Mr. Kedzia (Chairperson)

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* No summary record was prepared for the rest of the meeting.

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The meeting was called to order at 3 p.m.

Consideration of reports (*continued*)

(a) Reports submitted by States parties in accordance with articles 16 and 17 of the Covenant (*continued*)

Second and third periodic reports of Armenia (continued) (E/C.12/ARM/2-3; E/C.12/ARM/Q/2-3 and Add.1; HRI/CORE/ARM/2014)

1. *At the invitation of the Chairperson, the delegation of Armenia took places at the Committee table.*

2. **Ms. Ravenberg** (Country Rapporteur) asked what measures were being taken to expand the availability of professional health care, particularly in rural areas, and how the Government was tackling the problem of hospitals charging informal fees. Noting the high abortion rate and limited access to family planning, especially among young women in rural areas, she wished to know whether sex education was mandatory in schools, whether modern contraceptives were available and what efforts were being made to prevent sex-selective abortions.

3. **Mr. Marchán Romero**, referring to paragraphs 465 and 467 of the report, asked whether minorities were officially recognized only if they united under an NGO and why the State party felt it was necessary to link the preservation of cultural minorities to issues of national security. He wished to know how the State party ensured that persons living in remote areas, especially those with disabilities, had access to culture and science. He enquired about the accessibility of the Internet for persons with visual impairments, in particular those living in remote areas.

4. **Mr. Mancisidor**, quoting paragraph 339 of the report, asked in what cases fundamental general education was optional, whether that provision had ever been applied and whether the State party might consider amending it to better reflect the Covenant. Noting that the Government had spent less than 3 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) on education in 2006, he said that the rate was lower than in most comparable countries and asked what current education expenditures were. He invited the delegation to comment on the apparent lack of progress in preschool education and on measures undertaken to achieve the goal of education for all. He asked how public education policies and programmes promoted the knowledge and use of languages other than Armenian.

5. While he commended the State party for so closely mirroring the wording of article 15, paragraph 1 (b), of the Covenant in its Constitution and for providing such extensive information on the promotion of science, he asked whether the Government intended to increase spending on science and research. Furthermore, he was concerned at the fact that the proportion of women in the sciences was actually dropping and wondered whether anything was being done to reverse that trend.

6. **Mr. Abashidze**, pointing out that more Armenians lived abroad than in the country itself, asked about relations between the State party and the diaspora, specifically, whether the Government had signed any bilateral agreements with host countries to encourage members of the diaspora to maintain their cultural attachment to Armenia, including through the provision of textbooks on learning Armenian.

7. **Ms. Ravenberg** asked what other steps the State party was taking to guarantee adequate conditions in all schools, especially with respect to sanitation.

The meeting was suspended at 3.25 p.m. and resumed at 3.40 p.m.

8. *Mr. Kedzia took the Chair.*

9. **Mr. Avetisyan** (Armenia), providing a statistical overview of poverty in the country, said that both poverty and extreme poverty had been declining prior to the crisis, but had risen in its wake and were slowly returning to pre-crisis levels. The goal was for both those problems to be essentially resolved by 2025. Despite the economic downturn, the Government had continued to fulfil its social obligations, sharply increasing social benefits with a view, in part, to reducing child poverty. The Government had recently adopted a strategic programme for long-term development whose main focus areas were job creation, labour market restructuring, poverty and extreme poverty reduction and credit financing, with particular emphasis on agriculture and the high-tech sector and on reducing regional disparities.

10. **Ms. Baghdasaryan** (Armenia) said that eligible families received an allowance of 5,000 to 8,000 drams for each child in addition to the base family benefit, depending on their circumstances. In 2003, a study of the informal and formal sectors had been conducted in partnership with the International Labour Organization, resulting in a series of recommendations for the Government. A minimum wage had been calculated based on World Bank guidelines and international standards.

11. Social housing was a pressing issue, and the Government had established a special fund for that purpose in 2010. Eligible population groups included children living in institutions or without parental care and single pensioners. The first social housing complex had been built in 2012 and all 90 units had been allocated. The programme would be progressively expanded countrywide. Some 4,500 families had been provided with housing following the 1988 earthquake, although many more were still waiting. A housing programme for refugees was also under way.

12. Thanks to support from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Internet centres for persons with visual impairments had been opened in Yerevan. In addition, schools had been equipped to give children with visual impairments access to the Internet. Programmes had also been set up to encourage the employment of persons with visual impairments. Unfortunately, most cultural establishments and public transportation were not universally accessible, although there was a requirement that organizers of sporting and cultural events should ensure a certain level of accessibility. A bill on the social integration of persons with disabilities was being drafted, which would include provisions on accessibility.

13. **Mr. Kirakosyan** (Armenia) said that the adoption of the bill on domestic violence and related legislation had been postponed, due to certain legal obstacles identified by the Ministry of Justice. Newly revised drafts of the legislation were currently being considered by the Ministry and were scheduled to be submitted to the National Assembly by the end of 2015. An English version of the draft legislation, which was intended to fully regulate domestic violence and hold perpetrators accountable, was available for consultation if the Committee so wished. While national law did include various provisions on corporal punishment, the package of legislation on domestic violence contained more comprehensive regulations.

14. The Office of the Human Rights Defender did not keep separate statistics on the number of complaints involving discrimination, but many of the complaints it received of human rights violations were in fact linked to discrimination. The package of laws on discrimination that was currently in circulation should provide a more comprehensive legal framework for combating discrimination. It had been decided that it was not economically feasible to make all public buildings accessible to persons with disabilities within the next two years, and that a phased approach with a set time frame would be more realistic.

15. **Mr. Hovakimian** (Armenia) said that the contact his delegation had made with the Office of the Human Rights Defender in an attempt to answer the Committee's questions had set the stage for further cooperation between the Government and the Office.

16. **Ms. Sargsyan** (Armenia) said that a four-year strategy for the protection of the rights of children had been adopted in 2012, which included a blueprint for combating violence against children. The actions set out in the strategy would soon be incorporated into government practice.

17. **Ms. Soudjian** (Armenia) said that an inter-agency commission on the fight against domestic violence and gender-based violence had been established in 2010. The commission had drawn up an action plan to combat gender-based violence, which included measures to provide comprehensive support to victims and to punish perpetrators. Government action on the issue was guided by international instruments such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and its focus had recently shifted from strengthening the rights of women to enhancing gender equality.

18. Eleven minority groups were recognized as national minorities and had voluntarily set up NGOs to strengthen intercommunity relations. A cultural centre for national minorities had been opened in Yerevan in 2010. All cultural monuments in the country were under government protection, irrespective of the national culture to which they belonged. Government financial assistance to national minorities had doubled in the past year, reaching 20 million drams.

19. **Mr. Hovakimian** (Armenia) said that national minorities were mentioned in the National Security Strategy only in the context of preserving their cultural heritage and enhancing protection of their rights.

20. **Mr.** Hayk **Grigoryan** (Armenia), providing a statistical overview of the number of health-care providers in the country, said that 35 per cent of doctors and 51 per cent of nurses practised in rural areas. Health-care planning was based on the assumption that one doctor and one nurse were needed for every 2,000 inhabitants. Teenage pregnancy was not considered to be a major problem in Armenia, as the teenage pregnancy rate had never exceeded 5 per cent. The fact that the mother was a teenager was not in itself sufficient reason for performing an abortion. Forty-eight of the 60 obstetric hospitals in the country were located in rural areas. The Government worked in close cooperation with the United Nations Population Fund to provide the public with modern contraceptives, and the data showed that all women were aware of at least one modern method of contraception. The use of modern methods in preference to traditional methods had increased among married women in recent years. While the demand for contraceptives was not fully met, the Government planned to gradually increase the number of modern contraceptives it purchased.

21. All primary health care was provided free of charge, except for dental care, which was free only for members of vulnerable groups, children and the elderly. The Government aimed to increase financing for health services and to raise public awareness about the services available. A 24-hour hotline was available to receive complaints from users of the health-care services, particularly complaints about informal fees levied for those services. Sex education was included in a school programme on healthy living.

22. **Mr. Stepanyan** (Armenia) said that basic education was compulsory, except for persons who were no longer of school age, for whom free education was still guaranteed if they chose to attend school. The fact that State funding for education in Armenia did not match up to global standards was of great concern, but in absolute terms funding had remained stable or increased annually, even during the financial crisis. Under the newly adopted development strategy, funding for education was set to reach 4 per cent of GDP by

2025. In the past, preschools had been funded only by local governments, but in 2007 the State had begun funding the construction of preschools, primarily in rural areas, as part of a World Bank project. It was expected that by 2015 preschool education would attain 90 per cent coverage for children aged 5.

23. National minorities had the right to study their own language and culture, and the State funded the distribution of textbooks in national minority languages and organized initial and continuous training for teachers of minority languages and cultures. It also trained teachers of the Armenian language to teach Armenian children living abroad in the diaspora and published textbooks in Armenian for use in the diaspora.

24. Funding for scientific research and development was increasing in absolute terms and currently stood at about 1 per cent of GDP. Mechanisms and incentives to attract women to the fields of science and technology were currently being studied, as were ways of promoting cooperation between academia and industry. About 5 to 10 per cent of the annual education budget was allotted to refurbishing schools and developing school infrastructure, but that amount was insufficient to solve all existing infrastructural problems. About 100 schools would be refurbished in the coming years with the help of the World Bank and the United Nations Children's Fund, and he hoped that those schools currently lacking adequate running water and sanitation would receive top priority.

25. **Ms. Soudjian** (Armenia) said that the Armenian authorities were guided by the principle of self-identification of minorities, particularly with regard to the Kurds.

26. **Mr. Hovakimian** (Armenia) said that the number of Armenians living outside the country was three times larger than the country's population, with particularly large Armenian communities in the Russian Federation, the United States of America and France. In some cases, those communities had existed for much longer than the Republic of Armenia itself. The Ministry of Diaspora had been established to deal with that broad and complicated issue. Ties between Armenia and Georgia were particularly close. The largest foreign investors in the country were members of the diaspora, and they provided a great influx of capital. The amount received in remittances was comparable with the amount of the entire State budget.

27. **Ms. Shin** said that she wished to know the total number of complaints received by the Office of the Human Rights Defender in the past year. She hoped that in future the statistics on those complaints would be disaggregated by various grounds of discrimination.

28. **Ms. Ravenberg** asked what was being done to improve the quality of secondary education, which she understood had considerable shortcomings. Secondary school pupils were apparently finding it necessary to go to private tutors rather than attend school in order to attain the required standard.

29. What was being done to make education available to children with disabilities? She would appreciate information on the high numbers of poor children in boarding schools, and on the use of corporal punishment in those and other similar institutions.

30. The figures given for teenage pregnancies seemed quite high for a population of 3 million. Could the delegation elaborate further?

31. **Mr. Kerdoun** said that, given that the number of Armenians outside the country was greater than the number inside, he wondered what contribution the diaspora was making to the country's development. Could it be quantified, for example in terms of investment?

32. **Mr. Kirakosyan** (Armenia) said that in 2013 more than 1,000 complaints regarding human rights violations had been received and processed by the Office of the Human Rights Defender and 700 of those had had a positive outcome. In addition, the hotline had

received more than 1,000 urgent calls. There were no disaggregated statistics but the overall total for 2013 had been 19 per cent up on 2012.

33. **Ms. Baghdasaryan** (Armenia) said that corporal punishment was banned by law. Amendments had been proposed to the Family Code to ban it specifically in institutions and in the family. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs requirements for care in institutions included a ban on violence. Noting that there were around 900 children in homes, the majority with special needs, she said that, in one particular case referred to the Human Rights Defender, the issues had been addressed immediately, with both the Prime Minister and the oblast Governor visiting the home; the Director had been dismissed. All such institutions guaranteed children's rights; the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs worked with the Human Rights Defender and was able to make inspections at any time.

34. **Mr.** Hayk **Grigoryan** (Armenia), clarifying the figures on early pregnancy, said that in 1990 there had been 69 births in the 15–18 age group and 224 in the 20–24 age group, and for 2010 the figures were 30 and 126 respectively.

35. **Mr. Stepanyan** (Armenia) said that secondary school students resorted to tutors' services not to maintain a basic level of education but in order to prepare for university entrance examinations. Efforts were being made to reduce such reliance on tutors. In the past there had been two examinations at secondary level, the school-leaving examination and then a separate university entrance examination. Those had been merged into a single examination. In order to help students prepare and make the process more transparent, the examination questions were sent out in advance.

36. As to inclusive education for children with disabilities, he said that a bill had recently passed its first reading in Parliament and by 2022 it was envisaged that the transition to inclusive education would be complete. Since 2000, around 100 schools had already geared up to take students with any kind of disability.

37. Where schools had a boarding section, it was in many cases because the very large catchment area meant that it was too far for some children to make the journey each day. Other boarding schools, however, had been set up not to meet educational requirements but because of the poverty of children's families. Those schools had been brought under the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, which was attempting to organize support for families to enable such children to attend schools in their own communities.

38. **Mr. Hovakimian** (Armenia) said that the diaspora made a vital contribution to Aremenia's development. It was a landlocked country with no gas or oil resources, for example, and investment from outside was thus of enormous importance. In many cases individuals with Armenian roots took the initiative and paved the way for investment from other sources. It was, however, impossible to say precisely what their share in total investment was.

39. He thanked the members of the Committee for their interest in his country and its report. The Covenant was of great importance to Armenia and he hoped that its reports would become more regular.

40. Given the overall political picture and the context of Armenian development, there were still numerous challenges. The region was very sensitive and there were many imponderables. More refugees arrived in Armenia every year, for example. That was not intended as an excuse, but to show the nature of the challenges and threats Armenia faced. Of particular importance was the principle of self-determination. The United Nations and its bodies were universal in nature and universality was a major component of human rights: no part of the population should be deprived of rights because its right to self-determination was not recognized.

41. **Ms. Ravenberg** thanked the delegation of Armenia for the constructive dialogue. She had been impressed by its efforts to answer the Committee members' questions.

42. **The Chairperson** commended the State party on the high quality of its report and its replies to the list of issues, which had been important factors in the debate.

The discussion covered in the summary record ended at 5.10 p.m.